

Recent events show the strong need for Joe Biden to return to the democratic impulses of the Great Society



The first week of January was marked by two significant events in US politics: the run-off election victories in Georgia of Democrats Raphael Warnock and John Ossoff, giving the party control of the US Senate; and the invasion of the Capitol by insurrectionists seeking to disrupt the transition of power from Donald Trump to Joe Biden. [Ryan LaRochelle](#) writes that with control over all three branches of government, Joe Biden and the Democratic Party can address the democratic crisis illustrated by the Capitol insurrection by revisiting the democratic program of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society by passing electoral reform legislation, cancelling student loan debt, and investing in party-building efforts.

On January 5, Democrats Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff won their Senate run-off elections in Georgia, giving, with the casting vote of soon to be Vice-President, Kamala Harris, the party control of the Senate. The next day, a group of insurrectionists, goaded on by the sitting president, with support from Republicans in both chambers of Congress, sought to disrupt the peaceful transition of power by stopping the formal count of the Electoral College vote. The insurrectionists were [overwhelmingly](#) white and male, and the image of one man walking through the halls of Congress with the Confederate flag over his shoulder reflected the group's quest to restore white, male dominance in the United States. As Adam Serwer [wrote](#) in *The Atlantic*, "The Capitol riot was an attack on multiracial democracy."

As a nation, we face the choice of whether we want to push the US closer to a full, multi-ethnic democratic polity, or once again uphold what political scientists Rogers Smith and Desmond King refer to as the ["white supremacist racial order"](#) that has proven painfully difficult to dislodge.

There has rightfully been a renewed focus on [Reconstruction](#) and its demise in the late 1870s, when white reactionaries violently wrested control from newly enfranchised and empowered African Americans and restored white supremacy. But the challenges and opportunities of our current moment reflect more historically recent forces. What we are reckoning with today is the conservative response to the democratic thrust of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society

How LBJ's Great Society began the remaking of America

LBJ's vision of the Great Society was profoundly democratic. He introduced the idea at a commencement [address](#) at the University of Michigan in May of 1964. He remarked that, "The Great Society rests on abundance and liberty for all. It demands an end to poverty and racial injustice, to which we are totally committed in our time. But that is just the beginning."

To enact this vision, the Johnson administration passed landmark health care legislation like Medicare and Medicaid; civil rights initiatives including the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act; the Economic Opportunity Act which launched the War on Poverty; the Immigration Reform Act which abolished the existing quota system; and the Elementary and Secondary Act to expand educational opportunities.

More than any set of policy reforms before or since, the Great Society aimed to make America a fully inclusive democratic polity. Johnson's civil rights initiatives, which were the product of continued and persistent social movement [organizing](#) and activism, were at the center of his vision. In 1966, he [declared](#):

I will sleep tonight in the house where Lincoln slept. It was 100 years ago that a civil war was fought in this country to free the Negro from slavery. The Negro won that war, but he lost the battle still to come. Emancipation was a proclamation, but it was not a fact. I came here tonight to tell you that in the time allotted me, with whatever energy and ability I have, I do not intend for history to repeat itself.

But beyond such explicit civil rights initiatives, the Johnson administration used Great Society programs to chip away at racial inequality. The [Community Action Program](#), the cornerstone of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, employed an innovative administrative structure to bypass segregationist politicians at the state and local levels. By providing a mechanism to bypass state and local political elites, the Community Action Program delivered funds directly to low-income communities.

In 1965 and 1966, Johnson required southern school districts to move some Black students to white schools to comply with the Civil Rights Act's nondiscrimination requirements. Similar school districts with more Elementary and Secondary Education Act funds on the line were [more likely](#) to desegregate to receive federal dollars.

[Medicare](#) similarly had a civil rights component. The Public Health Service deployed inspectors to the South to ensure that hospitals were complying with federal requirements. Nearly 7,000 hospitals complied with new federal requirements immediately upon Medicare's implementation. Unsurprisingly, many facilities only desegregated once they were chastised by the Johnson administration. 5,500 facilities desegregated and instituted antidiscrimination policies following inspections.

As these examples make clear, it was necessary to use all the [power](#) of the federal government to attack racial inequality and push the U.S. closer to a true democracy. The imposition of federal registrars to monitor polling places, federal inspectors to investigate hospitals, and federal marshals to desegregate schools dealt significant blows to southerners' ways of life. But civil rights quickly became nationalized, as activists challenged de facto segregation in the [North](#), and protests and disorder erupted in the summers of 1965, 66, and 67.

The retreat from democracy in the face of opposition

When faced with opposition from a resurgent and more conservative Republican Party, the Johnson administration and the Democrats faced two choices. They could double down on their commitment to multiracial democracy, or retreat and allow the white supremacist racial order to reestablish itself. The critical juncture occurred in 1968, when the [Kerner Commission](#) issued its report on the urban uprisings of the previous summers. The Commission's [report](#) stated clearly that systemic racism, police brutality, and inequality were the chief causes of the nation's ills. At this point, Johnson's presidency was in a tailspin, engulfed by the chaos in Vietnam, challenges from within his own party, and a growing conservative opposition. LBJ ignored the report and the Democrats tacked to the center, retreating from democracy.

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This massive restructuring of federal-state relations generated intense backlash has given conservatives since LBJ's successor, Republican Richard Nixon, a useful foil to mobilize against. In a 1983 [speech](#), Ronald Reagan argued that the Great Society was arguably the greatest political blunder of the twentieth century. Reagan stated that "the central political error of our time" was the view, best embodied by LBJ and his Great Society, that "government and bureaucracy" should be "the primary vehicle for social change." One of his central goals was ["to undo the Great Society."](#) The spectre of multiracial Democracy that the Great Society pushed us towards has been a driving motivator for the modern conservative movement.

The events of last week prove that the democratic impulses of the Great Society remain unfinished. The [policy gains](#) of the Great Society were insufficient to guarantee democratic citizenship for all Americans, and conservatives have gradually retrenched many Great Society programs like the [Voting Rights Act](#) and various War on Poverty [programs](#). Johnson and the Democratic party failed to invest in the full mobilization and organization of local communities. As historian Elizabeth Hinton [notes](#), "The rhetoric of community involvement evaporated from the domestic policy arena when Ronald Reagan took office."

We can see the Great Society's fruits in the establishment of a coalition within the Democratic Party that consists of well-educated whites who hold racially liberal attitudes, young voters, and racial and ethnic minorities, what political scientists Philip Klinker and Thomas Schaller refer to as the ["Great Society coalition."](#) This is the exact coalition that helped [elect](#) Raphael Warnock, a Black pastor at Martin Luther King's former congregation and John Ossoff, a 33-year old former intern of representative John Lewis with a Master's degree from the London School of Economics. The fact that Georgia was even in play for the Democrats reflects the long-term, grassroots efforts of Black activists in the state, particularly [Black women](#) such as Stacey Abrams and LaTosha Brown.

How President Biden can start to rebuild American democracy

While Biden will understandably spend a significant amount of time during his first days in office addressing the COVID-19 crisis, his administration, with Democratic control of both chambers of Congress, should act immediately to shore up American democracy. The newly Democratic Senate should act quickly on H.R. 1 – a sweeping piece of legislation that expands voting rights, limits partisan gerrymandering, and places limits on the influence of private donor money in politics – which passed in the House in 2019 but has since languished in a Republican-controlled Senate.

Education was a central tenet of LBJ's Great Society, and our current moment calls for renewed investment in this cornerstone of democratic citizenship. In his University of Michigan speech, Johnson declared, "Our society will not be great until every young mind is set free to scan the farthest reaches of thought and imagination. We are still far from that goal." For too many Americans today, post-secondary education—which is critical in the modern economy—is either out of reach, or leaves students burdened with insurmountable debt. Biden should immediately address the [crisis](#) of student loan [debt](#) by broadly cancelling up to \$50,000 of federal student loan debt for those students who hold federal loans. Student loan debt [constrains](#) the economy, preventing people from buying homes, getting married, starting families, and pursuing advanced education. It is also a [racial justice issue](#). Black students accrue more student debt than whites, default at higher rates, and remain in debt for much longer than their white peers as they confront systems infused with structural inequalities and long-standing discriminatory practices. This should be the first step toward a new and different way of thinking about a renewed commitment to education as a public good.

Biden and the Democrats will have to go beyond policy gains in order to protect democracy and fulfil the goals of the Great Society. To fully capitalize on the type of organizational and grassroots work that flipped Georgia for Biden, Warnock, and Ossoff, the Democratic Party also needs to invest in party-building efforts. Republican presidents since Eisenhower have engaged in party-building activities at the national, state and local levels, which [includes](#) "funding local party-building initiatives, assiduously recruiting activists, volunteers, and candidates, teaching campaign techniques, and launching fundraising systems." In contrast, Democratic presidents, especially LBJ, hoped that policy gains would be enough to fully achieve democratic citizenship. Our current crisis of democracy shows that Democrats need to engage in the type of nuts-and-bolts political work to build a durable coalition to not only enact, but also to protect, democratic policy gains.

This more inclusive democracy poses a threat to the white supremacists who stormed the capitol on January 6. LBJ remarked in his University of Michigan [speech](#) that “The Great Society is not a safe harbor, a resting place, a final objective, a finished work. It is a challenge constantly renewed, beckoning us toward a destiny where the meaning of our lives matches the marvelous products of our labor.” We are at another critical juncture in America’s democratic development. It is time to finish the work of America’s democratization. We cannot retreat yet again.

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